

Imagining Alternatives and the Sociology of Futures:

Projectivity and the Capability to Aspire

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Abstract

How do individuals project into the future? How are aspirations activated? How do individuals and groups navigate the future in unsettled times? These questions resonate in the renewed scholarly interest in future making in the social sciences and, particularly, sociology. In this article, we argue that the processes shaping how individuals imagine alternative futures and their potential for achieving them necessitates cross-fertilization of theoretical terrains. We combine the conceptual tools within the sociology of futures (via Dewey) – projectivity, temporalities, contingencies, and the relational – with those of the capability approach – the capability to aspire, opportunity freedoms, agency freedoms and the power to act. Through this cross-fertilization, we develop a multi-dimensional framework for agency and futures, operationalized in an analytical model that can be applied to empirical and comparative research. Situating agency and futures within specific institutional, organizational, societal and cultural contexts in the model, we reveal the pathways through which aspirations are awakened and agency is enabled. These processes are intertwined with the capability to aspire, which is mirrored in a person's perceived scope of alternatives and sense of entitlement to seize opportunities, two intersubjective dimensions in the model. To illustrate our model, we use narratives from our empirical research on the aspirations for alternative futures in two cases: transnational migrants employed in the care/domestic sector and low-skilled employees in multi-national firms. These narratives underscore how crucial the capability to aspire is for the agency of vulnerable groups to navigate the future in unsettled times.

Key words: Agency, aspirations, capacity/capability, contingency, futures, temporality.

The sociology of the future has a long history of imagining alternatives mirrored in visions of utopias and dystopias (Adam and Groves 2007). The 1970s saw a flowering of studies on

futurology and the role of social scientists in redirecting the paths of social change (Bell and Mau 1971). In recent decade, the gaze toward the future is focused on the present/future creating blueprints for changing social systems of inequalities, such as Erik Olin Wright's multi-volume project on Real Utopias.¹ Other projections for the future look from the past and construct the future from present challenges (Adams and Grooves 2007, Urry 2016). A revived interest in the sociology of the future reflects increasing concerns over threats to climate and society), democratic institutions, ideologies, and social structures in the current era (Urry 2011; Adam 2011).² Proponents of an agenda for *a sociology of the future* acknowledge the importance of recognizing individuals as active agents constructing the future; however, this aspect, which we refer to as the *sociology of futures*, lies outside their agenda.

The sociology of futures engages with future aspirations, alternative imaginings, and projective horizons of individuals and collective actors as agents constructing the future (Groves 2016, Mische 2009, Vaisey 2010). It finds its roots in earlier traditions, most notably, the pragmatist (Dewey 1950; Mead 1932), with its emphasis on future orientations, agency and social action. The path breaking articles by Embirbayer and Mische (1998) and Mische (2009) lay out the contours of a sociology of futures: where actors are capable of formulating projects with unforeseen outcomes, actively constituting their environments. Although there has been a flurry of articles on agency and future orientations focusing on the cognitive experiential dimensions of future orientations there is a fragmentation and incoherence in the research, hindering the development in the field.

¹ Funded by the Sage foundation, Wright's ambitious mega project, produced numerous volumes on gender, class, and capitalism, seeking reconcile tensions between utopias and real practice. Another large-scale Russell Sage project in progress began in 2017 addresses The future of work and technological change: (<https://socialsciences.rice.edu/russell-sage-foundation-future-or-work>).

² This call for a sociology of the future became the thematic frame for the ISA meetings in 2017 (<http://www.isa-sociology.org/forum-2016/>). The same year *The Sociological Review* dedicated a special issue to "Futures in Question: Theories, Methods, Practices" (Coleman and Tutton 2017). Most recently, The Council for Europeanists organized a conference on Europe's past, present and future: *Utopias and Dystopias, 2021*.

Within the general framework of agency and futures, there are myriad concepts: projectivity (Mische 2009), aspirations and expectations (Vaisey 2010, Beckert 2016), trajectories and plans (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), controversial scriptwritings and future scenarios (Chateauraynaud and Debaz 2017). Various theories and perspectives underpin them. Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) construct a theory of anticipation based upon how individuals coordinate the future through interaction and negotiations with others in various temporal landscapes. Mische offers a framework for cognitive dimensions in projective futures, focusing on temporalities, connectivity and contingency. Hitlen and Johnson (2015) incorporate psychological aspects of agency asking how perceptions of self-efficacy/mastery (Bandura 1991) shape future orientations over the life course. Beckert (2013, 2016) addresses imagined futures through the lens of “fictional expectations”, as narrative forms that make uncertainties cognitively accessible and guide decision-making in economic markets. Taking environmental issues as a case in point, Chateauraynaud and Debaz (2017) focus on the controversial “scriptwritings” of futures scenarios that result from the combinations of different “regimes of enunciation” (“emergency”, “expectation”, “anticipation”, “forecasting”, “foresight”, “promise”, “prophecy and science fiction”) through which people try to overcome the uncertainties concerning the future.

Nevertheless, among these diverse approaches there are some points of convergence and shared assumptions. One common dimension is the future as project always in the making within an imaginative horizon of multiple plans and possibilities (Schütz 1967, Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This dynamic view of future action is embodied in the concept of projectivity that assumes agency is situated: our projects and plans are culturally and socially embedded, evolving in time and space as well as interactions with others (Dewey 1950; Mead 1932, Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This does not imply that our future projections “actually” predict the future or provide much leverage on what individuals choose or

achieve (Mische 2009). Rather, it is a cognitive process that occurs in everyday life that influences social action (Archer 2003, Abbott 2016).

Cultural and cognitive processes are in the foreground of the theoretical landscape of the sociology of futures in which narratives, scripts, regimes and repertoires shape people's projectivity (Mische 2014, 2009; Lamont 1992), what Swidler (1986) has referred to as the cultural toolkit. However, beyond the basic tenet, culture matters in imagining future alternatives, there is less agreement on which narratives and scripts are available for some persons and not others and to what extent cultural repertoires lead to a course of action (Lamont and Small 2003; Silva and Corse 2018).

Mische (2009: 702) has called for grounding the sociology of futures in the cultural, the relational and institutional. Nevertheless, how agency is grounded in these contexts is unspecified, not conceptually linked to agency in future making; the processes involved remain a black box. The gap we seek to fill is how agency and future orientations are concretely embedded in layers of context, and how these contexts interact in shaping people's projectivity, agency and the power to act. When considering future orientations, agency and the power to act, we recognize that the situated actor can interact within multiple contexts. Contexts might be cultural, relational and institutional but also organizational. In our era, layers of context include the virtual and the global as salient dimensions. The internet exposes persons with a narrow aspirational window (Ray 2003) to alternative possibilities and pathways for change.

New theoretical strategies are necessary to open up conceptual space for integrating situated cultural, institutional and societal dimensions into the analysis of agency and future orientations. New theoretical models need to be developed that can be applied to comparative empirical research. In order to address this challenge, we introduce theoretical perspectives from two non-sociologists, in which imagining alternatives futures are fundamental: the

capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004; 2014) and the capability to aspire (Sen 1992, 1999). Anthropologist Ajun Appadurai's framework on the capacity to aspire engages with how individuals navigate the future within cultural and social spaces. Here, context is front and center where aspirations are not simply viewed as individual, but are formed in the "thick of social life" (Appadurai 2004). Economist Amartya Sen's contextualized multi-dimensional framework offers a dynamic agency approach for analyzing future orientations in which the agency is nested in specific societal and institutional environments. Although the capability to aspire is not a specific concept that Sen has used in his writings, it is implicit in Sen's approach and others who have applied his framework (Lambert et al. 2012; Hobson 2014; Hart 2016; Ray 2016; Flechtner 2017). The capability to aspire lies at the heart of his dynamic concept of agency in which he asks us to consider not only what a person does, but what are her opportunities to be and do, to lead a life that she intrinsically values, and to choose and develop projects and alternative ways of living. At the interface between having aspirations and the opportunities to achieve them, the capability to aspire strongly links projectivity to their perception of the scope of possibilities afforded by everyday life.

Our purpose in this paper is twofold. (1) We seek to extend the theoretical borders of the sociology of futures. Central to this endeavor is a cross-fertilization in theoretical terrains that reaches across conceptual domains. (2) We aim to develop a multi-layer and dynamic framework for agency and futures that can be operationalized in an analytical model and applied in empirical and comparative research.

The cross-fertilization we propose bridges the conceptual tools of the sociology of futures: *projectivity, temporalities and contingencies, agency and the relational*, with those of the capability to aspire: *opportunity freedoms, agency freedoms and the power to act*. Bridging the cognitive, experiential and relational dynamics of the sociology of futures with the capability to aspire, necessitates that we situate agency and futures within specific

institutional, organizational, societal and cultural contexts that allow us to *explore how agency is activated* in the process of imagining futures, *how it is intertwined with the capability to aspire*. The pragmatist approach, addressing the future through a cognitive and experiential lens, provides some ground to elaborate such a cross-fertilization (Zimmermann 2006).

We use examples from earlier research to illustrate the model we draw from this cross-fertilization. These encompass two comparative projects in which the future as a project is a salient dimension. One is based upon Hobson's project on the aspirations for alternative futures among transnational migrants employed in the care domestic services sector in Spain and Sweden. Whether these aspirations are activated depends upon social networks and family support, but also importantly on specific national policy contexts, that can hinder or enable aspirations (Hobson et al. 2018; Fahlén and Dominguez-Sanchez 2017). The other is derived from Zimmermann's study of employees' capabilities to aspire for professional development with respect to opportunities for training and upgrading skills in global firms based in France and Germany. Aspirations take shape in the interactions between individuals' pathways, the multinational training policy and its local implementation (Zimmermann 2020).

In both these cases, we engage with the extent to which specific policies and discourses open up opportunities that provide genuine choice in future projects, but our focal point is on those with fewer means and resources and weaker capabilities.

In the first part of the paper, we focus on the conceptual tools in the model. We address the cognitive and experiential dimensions in projecting the future and then continue with the two interlocking concepts of the capacity and capability to aspire, reflected in Appadurai and Sen's theories of the potential for realizing alternative futures. In the second part, we present our multi-dimensional model of agency and alternative future-making, beginning with

situated agency, the node bridging of our two main conceptual domains in the model. Then we turn to the interactions and processes in the model through examples and narratives from the two empirical cases described above.

CONCEPTUAL TOOLKIT

Among phenomenologists and existentialists, the future is understood as an essential core of human life, a completed action to be; for Sartre, an unfettered freedom to remake ourselves (Sartre, 2003); for Husserl (1960), it is a universal aspect of action. In the social sciences, rather than the universal aspect of the future for the human condition, it is a project that exists in time and space.

Imagining Alternatives: a Cognitive Experiential Lens

As introduced above, there are many concepts deployed in sociology to relate to future prospects. Emibayer and Mische (1998) as well as Mische (2009; 2014) use the terms project and projectivity in their discussion of human agency and future orientations. Here, the future as project appears as a deliberative process rather than unconscious or routinized habits of thought. It is grounded in perceptions of the possible, not fantasy, but plausible alternatives, what Schütz refers to as practical credibility (in Beckert 2003: 148), Sen as “practical possibility” (Sen 1985: 15) and Appadurai (2004) as thoughtful thinking versus wishful thinking. Rather than project, we use the more dynamic and process-oriented concept of projectivity in which the project is a process in the making, nested in different layers of context, reflecting interactions with others (Mische, 2009).

Though he rarely uses the term projectivity, John Dewey offers a set of conceptual tools that allow us to empirically investigate the cognitive and experiential processes involved in

projectivity. He invites us to consider imagining futures as an activity that is anchored both in lived experience and a logic of inquiry. As a cognitive and reflexive process, the logic of inquiry is not limited to scientific matters but is part of everyday life. It provides a bridge between projectivity and the capability to aspire linking projectivity to ends in view, what we conceive of as being a desired future end (Dewey 1950: 225-226; Dewey 1965 [1938]: 44), or in Sen's terms, links projectivity to a future we value. This involves a process by which the foreseen consequences from an activity adds meaning and directs its further course. Far from being the mere product of individual impulse, ends in view depend upon a person's experience (involving the present) and life course (involving the past), while being shaped by the means (resources) and possibilities (opportunities) that characterize people's environment in a given situation of action, an important aspect of the capability to aspire.

With Dewey's pragmatist approach in the foreground, we consider projectivity as lived experience, as the crucible for future imaginings. Following his conceptualization of experience (Dewey, 1965 [1938]): 23-52), we address projectivity along two dimensions: a longitudinal one that articulates peoples' past and present into a logic of inquiry about how the future could or should look like, and a lateral dimension designed by the interactions between a person and her environment. While the longitudinal aspect is imbricated in temporalities and contingencies, the lateral one is part of people's relational experience, both of which are elaborated below. Such an approach reveals projectivity as a dynamic process where individual's aspirations meet at the crossroad between their past and present experience and the conditions of the environment they live in.

The relational

Our future projects and alternative scenarios are formed in interaction with others as underlined by Dewey. Relational dynamics play an important role in how we envision the future: the quality of the interactions we have with others and the environment we live in, but also whether we view our futures as individual independent or linked to family, communities (Mische 2009) or any other group. Rather than an either-or, the embeddeness of projectivity is a question of degree and emphasis, which can vary by cultural context for instance (Appadurai 2014). Social networks and group affiliations, and other relational interactions influence aspirations and imaginings in diverse ways (Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). They can act as resources as well as constraints on possible futures. For instance, Willis' (1977) study of working class lads reveals how allegiance to their peer group and social identity framed their possibilities for imagining alternative futures. Szalia and Schiff (2014) show how ethnic group loyalty inhibits youth from leaving neighborhoods with poor-performance schools. At the same time, networks beyond one's community and neighborhood can offer alternative scenarios, narratives that expand projective horizons (Lund 2018).

Temporalities and contingencies

Time and temporalities are core dimensions in the scholarship on futures and agency where past, present and future meet in how individuals actively shape future aspirations (Emibaryer and Mische 1998). Dewey refers to this as the reflective capacity to read the future. As a cognitive dimension of the inquiry process, reflexivity allows to produce a form of continuity that binds the past to the future in a creative way (Dewey, 1965 [1938]): 23-52). Continuity does not just mean repetition of the past, rather past experiences produce a "reserve of

knowledge” (Schütz and Luckmann 1973) that shapes our ways of perceiving and producing frames of reference that might be transformed, adapted by their reflexive incorporation into the experience of the present and the projections into the future.

Temporality has multiple levels and aspects that are integrated into our model of imagining alternative futures. Future orientations can involve immediate and long-term perspectives, revealed in differences in perceptions of time horizons (Mische 2009): how far ahead the individual plans her future, which is among others influenced by age, life phase and social position. Gender differences in time horizons are apparent in women’s postponement of future projects advancing their education and careers during their childbearing years, which affect their future prospects (Evertsson 2016). Education and social class position also affect planning and building of scenarios. The assumption in much of the literature on future making is that more resourced middle-class families are more likely to engage in long-term planning than those of the working class (Emibaryer and Mische 1998, Vaisey, 2010). The processes shaping this outcome are contested as well whether it is a goal for all. For instance, Lund (2018) nuances this perspective on class and future orientations arguing that the working class engage with different plans for the future, involving social ties, community relationships rather than education and career. Lamont makes a similar point in her book among working class men and France (Lamont 2009).

Beyond gender and socio-economic factors shaping time horizons, imagining futures takes place in temporal landscapes, which reflect specific historical / contextual times. For instance, uncertainty and risk are characterizations that not only abound in our political, social and academic discourses, encapsulated in images of fluid modernity and the risk society (Beck 1992, Giddens, 1991; Tavory and Eliasson 2013), but also in lived experiences (Kanjou-Mrčela and Černigo-sadar 2015).

Contingencies can produce disruption in individual lives that call for solutions. They encompass a range of unforeseen events that can produce a change in perception of one's scope of alternatives, a rescaling of expectations and reassessing of goals. These can involve individual events, such as divorce, death of a partner, loss of a job, and collective events at the global level. The 2008 economic crisis had lasting effects on individual aspirations long after the initial shock of financial collapse and bankruptcies. More recently, the global pandemic has resulted in shutdowns and layoffs placing families at risk and generating an atmosphere of uncertainty that may have similar effects, upending alternative futures. For the thousands of migrants leaving war-torn countries, ravaged by ethnic and political conflict, particularly those stranded on the Greek Islands of Moira and Lesbos, the global disruption has meant more than a recalibration of future, but a total eclipse in projectivity and future making.

Tavory and Eliasoph (2013), however, make the point that this temporal landscape of uncertainty does not necessarily lead toward a degeneration in future imaginings. Rather it can lead toward a shift in how persons construct narratives and projects (ibid.: 928) and ways in which they relate to the past and coordinate futures differently. There is some evidence for this in a study of Swedish youth, showing that in orienting themselves to their future working life, the young and highly educated have adapted to uncertainty and appear at ease with it – viewing it in terms of open-ended futures (Ye 2018). Yet, this group may represent a minority; others in a less advantaged position may not perceive the restructuring of work in a global economy with the same equipoise. In a similar vein, temporal landscapes of uncertainty can appear salient to some and not others. Here the collective threat that global warming and climate change poses to humans and other species may be ignored by large swathes of the populations. While for others, the sense of risk is deeply felt, pervasive in their everyday choices, directly influencing individuals' horizon of projectivity. Recent studies of

birth intentions reflect this. One such example is the unexplained precipitous decline in birthrates in Norway, a well-off very stable country (Vignole et al. 2020).

Imagining the future in unsettled and uncertain times depends upon who is projecting into the future, where and in which contexts – involving the family, firm, community, the nation state, and beyond the state, global institutions and processes. Embedding agency in a multi-layering context is the ground from which we view how projectivity is transfigured into action: how the capacity and capability to aspire are awakened; how potential to achieve goals appear feasible and the power to act enabled.

Capacity and Capability to Aspire

The capacity and capability to aspire have been used interchangeably (Baillergeau and Duyvendack 2019); they both address the potential of individuals to imagine alternative ways of living, while underlying that aspirations are never just individual but take shape in interaction with others and the contexts shaping them. The very definition of capacity in the *Oxford dictionary* suggests this: the *ability or capacity* to do something or act in a particular way.³ It is where Appadurai and Sen's account of how aspirations can be translated into action coincide. One difference between them is that Sen's framework is more specified with its own conceptual toolkit.

Appadurai (2004) considers aspirations as cultural *capacities*, dependent on how individual and collective actors navigate cultural and social spaces, shaped by language capability, norms, and traditions, but also access to networks. Those with high education and economic resources are best able to utilize norms, ideas and justifications (“cultural regimes”) to project

³ Definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* make the distinction between capacity that exists in the present while capability suggests future orientation, defined as a property or condition otherwise of being capable of being converted into use or that which can be demonstrated under the right conditions.

their futures and fulfill their aspirations. Conversely, possibilities for alternative futures appear as distant horizons for those with the least power and voice, who tend to accept their lot. However, Appadurai asserts that the capacity to aspire can be awakened and activated even among the poorest. His study of Mumbai slum dwellers revealed that those with the barest of citizenship participation when mobilized, and in this case with help of Ngos, recognized their collective voice and power to influence their futures.

Two important insights for a dynamic concept of agency and future orientation can be derived from Appadurai's account of the capacity to aspire: (1) Recognition and collective voice are central components for activating aspirations for the future for marginalized groups; and (2) while the capacity to aspire emerges within local systems of value, meaning, communication and dissent, the global interpenetrates the local, what sociologists refer to as the glocal (Robertson 1995).

Characterizing the capacity to aspire as a meta-capacity, Appadurai (2004: 82) asserts that it can generate the building of other capacities. This entails incorporating other conceptual landscapes: recognition and respect (Honneth 1995, Taylor 1994, Nussbaum 2008), voice and power (Hirschman 1970) and capabilities to choose alternatives and achieve them (Sen 1992, Nussbaum and Sen 1993). The capacity to aspire and the capability to aspire are interlocking dimensions: the awakening of aspirations and possibilities to achieve them, that is, having the resources that enable us to imagine how we can steer our futures. With its emphasis on cultural capacities and the differences in cultural regimes, Appadurai's capacity to aspire, provides a bridge to sociology of futures through scripts and repertoires for engendering aspirations that can lead to strategic action. However, the capability to aspire seems to us a more germane concept for imagining alternative futures since it specifies the mechanisms that enable agency and the potential for achieving these alternatives.

Agency and opportunity freedoms

For those weak with few resources, the capability to aspire is the crucial dimension for projecting into the future.⁴ Here, Dewey's insights on the future aims as "ends in view" (1950: 225; 271-72) are akin to the capability to aspire. A celebrated example of how this works in practice can be found in Philanthropist Eugene Lang dreamers program, where he offered 6th graders in a Harlem school, predominately black and Hispanic students, free tuition to any college for all those who graduated high school. In a school where the principal expected fewer than three-fourths would ever finish high school, 90 percent finished high school and 60 percent pursued higher education (<https://www.ihaveadreamfoundation.org/honoring-eugene-lang/>).

This opportunity that awakened aspirations was dependent upon the generosity of an individual philanthropist. In Sen's capability approach social justice is foundational (Sen 2009), the goal being to enable all persons to have the opportunities to be and to do what they have reasons to value. The capability to aspire is built upon an overall reduction of agency inequalities, for instance through the development of institutional structures and policies that promote the potentialities for self-development for all. In this respect, Sen's social justice perspective offers a link between the two currents in sociology of futures; the macro level, the designing of real utopias, and the micro level in projectivity, how agents construct their futures.

The former is evident in Sen's influence on policy design and for evaluation of programs and global indicators of human development (Fakuda-Parr 2003; Stanton 2007). The latter, lies at the core of Sen's dynamic concept of agency and choice. Sen's hypothetical question, what would persons choose if they had alternatives, is in fact an exercise in projectivity. With respect to imagining alternatives, Sen's concept of agency-freedom, i.e. the possibility to

⁴ Vaisey (2010: 85-86) observed in his study of future educational aspirations among youth that for the middle class education was assumed, automatic, where aspirations and expectations coalesce. For the poor, having aspirations were much more important for their likelihood to expect to continue their education than for the non-poor, however, he does not engage with how these aspirations were activated.

achieve what one values, embraces the sense of open-endedness in futures, although recognizing that our projects are bounded by personal abilities and the natural environment (Sen 1992). Yet they are not in Sen's perspective just determined by the conditioning of our past. Agency can propel us into the future: expand our horizons and activate our capability to aspire.

However, capability is not merely about agency and the possibility to realize one's choice, but also what Sen (2009) refers to as opportunity (freedoms) that pertain to the scope and process in choice. Emerging from the multilayered context (institutional, societal, organizational) and situated agency, opportunity freedoms need in turn to be converted into valued achievements.

Viewed from the capability lens, aspirations, our imagined futures, are encased in real options, "practical possibility" (Sen 1985: 15), "substantive freedom" (Sen 1992). Whereas projectivity is a process reflecting how we envision the future, continually remaking our goals, the capability framework engages with our potential for achieving them, the means and resources we have to convert our projects into agency-freedom for making change.

Conversion of resources

Referred to as conversion factors (Robeyns 2005), these can encompass a range of institutional, organizational, societal and cultural resources: laws and rights (Barnard et al. 2001), specific policy instruments (Hobson et al. 2014), discourses (Peper et al. 2014), stakeholders (Salais and Villeneuve 2004), social networks (Stieglitz and Sen 2009), enterprise organizational policies and practices (Subramanian and Zimmermann 2017) etc. If, when and how these resources get converted in agency for change depends upon the specific features of each situation of action. Embedded in different layers of contexts, conversion factors can be positive and negative, dampen or spark our capacity to aspire, as well as

weaken or enable agency and possibilities to achieve our goals and life projects (Sen, 1992, 1999).

Given our purpose is to engage with potential for change (agency freedoms for alternative futures), we speak about conversion processes and how they are tailored to specific future projects and orientations. By focusing on conversion processes rather than just factors, we underscore the dynamic and fluid aspects of converting resources and capabilities and how the cognitive and experiential are interwoven into these processes (Hobson, 2018). This has been the main thrust in recent sociological adaptations and extensions of Sen's approach and applied to empirical sociological research.

Sociologists operationalizing Sen's capability framework have incorporated cognitive experiential and cultural dimensions that provide the basis for dialogue across theoretical frameworks in the sociology of futures. Zimmermann (2006), through her pragmatist experiential lens, has introduced a situated and relational approach into the capability framework. Hobson (2014, 2018) has elaborated cognitive mechanisms shaping conversion of resources: the perception of scope of alternatives and the sense of entitlement to make claims for policies and programs that can enable agency freedoms. Hvinden and Halverson (2018) highlighted networks and associations as supporting capabilities for the disabled.

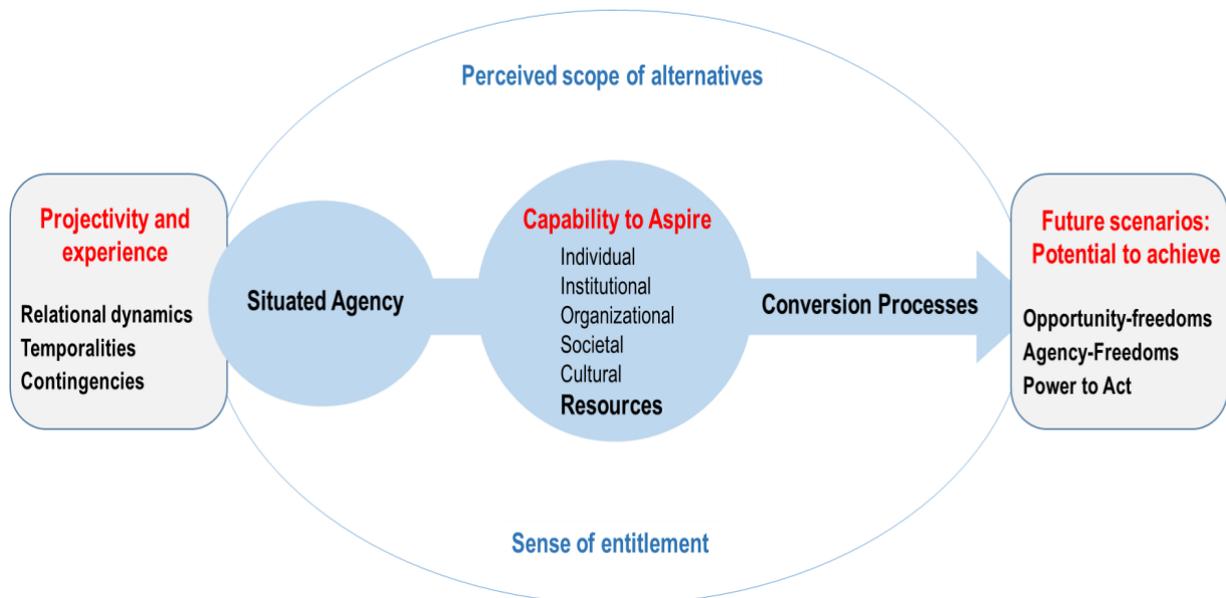
These perspectives and the process-oriented approach that they embody, lay the groundwork for a cross-fertilization in conceptual terrains in which situated agency is a core dimension in the multi-dimensional model.

A PROCESS-ORIENTED MODEL

The model below offers a framework for operationalizing a dynamic concept of agency and future imaginings that can be applied to empirical research.⁵ Rather than a causal model, it

seeks to reveal the processes shaping capability for alternative futures and highlights the interactions among these different levels of analysis: the temporal and relational aspects (projectivity); the cultural and structural dimensions in the capability to aspire; the cognitive dimensions that reach the inter-subjective and experiential dimensions (the perception of scope of alternatives; the sense of entitlement to make claims). Situated agency is the thread that runs through the cross-fertilization in these processes.

Figure 1: Imagining alternative Futures: a multi-dimensional model



Situated Agency

Situated agency appears as central node in the model connecting the agency focused sociology of futures (projectivity) with its cognitive and experiential lens via temporal and

relational dynamics and the agency centered capability approach with its pathways to the capability to aspire and the conversion of resources into agency freedoms.

Situated agency is a dynamic concept that reaches beyond the notion of social positioning, even multiple positionings (Sen 1992, 1999) including class, gender, ethnicity/race, age, disability, migrant status and their intersections (McCall 2005, Hill Collins and Bilge 2016).

Neither Sen's notion of multiple positioning nor Bourdieu's formulation of habitus and the social field (1992), offer a wide enough lens for understanding how contingencies and changing temporal landscapes can alter life projects and alternative futures.

The pragmatist notion of situated action, the nexus where past, present and future temporalities meet and experience unfolds, does not exclude consideration of the effects of position. However, it foregrounds the interactions of the individual with the environment that she acts within. Individuals are situated in time and in relations to others, they interact with social, organizational and institutional environments, all of which, are fluid and dynamic (Abbott 2016). A process-oriented approach, what Abbott refers to as processual analysis, is integral to our approach of situated agency. It integrates time and changes within the framework of situated action. It presumes that rather than just being part of a collection of social entities and structure, the individual interacting in the social world is an ongoing process, making, unmaking and remaking itself (Abbott 2016).

Situated agency shapes and is shaped by individual, cultural, societal, institutional and organizational resources for imagining alternative futures and how they are converted into action. However, agency-based projectivity does not only require access to resources, but also involves intersubjective dimensions, where the capability to aspire is reflected in two cognitive processes: the perception of one's scope of alternatives and the sense of entitlement to make claims for alternative futures (visualized as arcs traversing across the dimensions in the model). Both are processes in formulating visions of the future and scenarios for change:

what we perceive as possible (Hitlin and Johnson 2015) and our openness to opportunities and pathways, which reveal differences in agency and choice in everyday situations. Both are transversal concepts in our framework of agency and futures, arcs that reach from projectivity, to the capacity to aspire and impact the power to act.

Perceived Scope of Alternatives and Sense of Entitlement

Perceptions of the scope of alternatives have multi-level and multi-dimensional aspects. In the realm of everyday interactions and practices, the perception of scope of alternatives is often shaped by the interactions in our immediate circle: our family, peers, neighborhood and workplace. Rather than in social categories and structures, inequalities in class, race, ethnicity and gender and their interactions, are revealed in actual experiences of discrimination and exclusion, which can act as frames of reference, dampening expectations and constricting perceptions of alternatives for the future, even after the capacity to aspire has been awakened. Migrants, with high education and expectations for better futures, once in receiving countries, where they are only offered low-wage dead-end jobs, soon adjust perceptions of their alternatives for the future (Hobson et al. 2018). Similarly, low skilled workers who for years have been excluded from a company's training programs, when offered, have adjusted their expectations to the point that they are unable to express any training aspiration or even their need for them (Lambert et al. 2012).

Looking from the macro level, we view the perceptions of the scope of alternatives of a situated actor grounded in specific layers of context. Though we reject the notion of homogeneous national cultures (Lamont 1995), we realize that cultural narratives can resonate in societies in specific time frames, which shape perceptions of one's scope of alternatives. For instance, in Central and Eastern European countries, the perceptions of the

scope of alternatives for futures are bound up with past narratives from the socialist regime, which include both a lack of trust in institutions and the potential for change (Hobson 2014) alongside nostalgia for an era when basic security in employment and welfare services were assured (Kanjou-Mrcela and ČernigoJ-sadar 2014; Szalai 2008). In the recent past, the 2008 global crisis left its imprint on narratives of projectivity in countries such as Spain, one of our cases, where the bite of the crisis cut deeply. The narratives of pessimism about future prospects remains a reservoir of knowledge interacting with past, present and future (Hellgren and Serrano 2019).

As is the case with the perception of scope of alternatives, the situated actor's sense of entitlement to claims for alternatives exists at many levels: within the family, where individual agency is constrained by cultural norms (Hobson 2018; Sen 1991); within firms, where organizational rules and norms shape perceptions of what one can ask for (Hobson 2014; Lewis and Smithson 2001; Lambert et al. 2012; Zimmermann 2011); or in welfare bureaucracies where there is a strong stigmatism for being on the dole (Bonvin and Maochon 2014).

The sense of entitlement reflects differences in individual resources but also institutional, organizational and societal ones. Those with the most individual resources, skills, education and networks – with exit possibilities for alternative choices (Hirschman 1970) – are more likely to have a strong sense of entitlement for claims making. However, rather than merely a sense of self-worth or self-efficacy (Bandura 1991), the sense of entitlement is embedded in cultural, structural, organizational, societal and institutional environments (Hobson et al. 2014). These undergird the sense of what is possible and realizable: whether a person perceives that she can actually claim a right, take advantage of policy, seize opportunities, express voice in determining how policies are implemented. As is shown in the model, the sense of entitlement is connected both to opportunity and agency freedoms; it is a crucial link

in the chain of projectivity, conversion processes and alternative futures, whether we can exercise choice and have the potential to act on our goals.

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES: LIVED LIVES

We illustrate our model through examples and narratives of lived lives. Given that this is an exploratory paper with space constraints, we confine our analysis to two cases, gleaned from our earlier empirical research: the migrant domestic worker,⁶ and the low skilled factory worker.⁷ We situate them in specific institutional and organizational contexts and time frames. Through Yolanta's and Shao Fen's accounts, we highlight how projectivity and perception of future possibilities take shape when the capability to aspire is connected to real opportunity (freedoms) and converted into agency freedoms for choice and the power to act upon them. Revealed in these narratives of situated experiences are the complexities and dynamic aspects of conversion processes: the import of specific laws and policies and organizational cultures at particular moments in time and the life course for some and not others; what role family members and networks play in these processes.

Ends in View

Yolanta migrated from Poland in 2006 when she was 26 years old. At the time of the interview in 2014 she was 34 years old. In Poland, she was educated to be a tailor at a vocational high school, but left her home country because of the shortage of work, searching for more opportunities in Sweden. As many economic migrants do, she followed her country

⁶ The interviews with migrant domestic workers were conducted in three cities: Madrid, Barcelona and Stockholm between 2013-2014. For a description of the data; see Hobson et al. 2018).

⁷ The investigation covered a French and a German subsidiary of six multinational firms. For a presentation of the inquiry and data, see Zimmermann, 2020.

women, migrating to Sweden a year after her cousin and her cousin's husband, with whom she is still living. She settled in a Swedish suburb with a large Polish community and extensive networks for job seekers.

She and her cousin were first employed by a Polish woman who ran an illegal household cleaning service, and took a large portion of their earnings. After a year, Yolanta began working on her own, the same year the government passed a reform to formalize the domestic service sector through tax subsidies, which led to an expansion in the sector. For Yolanta, this meant she had to learn Swedish to be able to contract directly with clients, which she did through the state supported language school (SFI). Although courses are free, migrants in this low-wage precarious sector, often have too little control over their work hours and/or earn too little to be able to reduce these hours in order to devote time to language study. Those who could do this had the support of a partner or family member. Yolanta was among this group.

Language capability is a key divide between good and bad jobs in migrant domestic work.

Those without these skills are often paid lower wages and forced to work extra hours without pay in a market dominated by thousands of small firms competing with one another (Hobson et. al 2018). Yolanta's knowledge of Swedish enabled her to exert more control over wages, working hours and conditions, as well as look for employment with companies whose employees are covered by collective agreements. Subsequently, she landed a secure full-time job with a large company cleaning hotels, with decent wages, benefits and unemployment rights and social security. This situation is hardly the norm in this sector.

As a result, Yolanta began earning enough to maintain a decent standard of living, send remittances of about 1000-2000 SEK home to her parents each month, and save money for future studies. She intends to live permanently in Sweden and sees new opportunities on the horizon: "there is work here and the possibility to educate oneself." After living and working in Sweden for over seven years, she is now a permanent resident, which paves the way for

projecting into the future and constructing an alternative scenario. She intends to become more proficient in Swedish and plans to gain the credentials necessary to work in the health care sector, where she sees prospects for good jobs.

Yolanta lacks a gymnasium education, in contrast to the most migrant domestic workers in Sweden who have reached that level or have higher education. Yet, once settled in Sweden, she recast her expectations and began envisioning a future with real options for change.

These were activated through her perception of “ends in view” through educational opportunities. In Sweden, higher education in Sweden is free and permanent residents can also receive a stipend, along with low-interest government loans.

For Yolanta and other migrants we interviewed, family support was decisive for their plans to study, to convert opportunity freedoms into agency and choice in futures. Another resource that Yolanta could draw upon in the capability to aspire was the well-established Polish community in Sweden, which provided networks for jobs and legal advice through active immigrant associations and websites.

Yolanta’s optimism for future prospects and projections of alternative scenarios were not exceptional. Most of the other migrants we interviewed expressed similar aspirations and expectations for change: better jobs were out there and educational opportunities if one mastered the language. About half of the migrants said that they intended to study or upgrade their skills, in line with the outcomes in a large-scale survey done the same year as our interviews. Only about one-third in our study had specific plans beyond enrolling in a language course (Hobson et.al. 2018). Few stated that they expected to continue working in the sector in the next year.⁸ However many would not be able to overcome obstacles,

⁸ The quantitative survey, mentioned above, was carried out in Sweden the same year as our qualitative interviews. The results showed that 47% of those employed in the sector, with higher education obtained in the Swedish system were able to move clerical/professional jobs. The same study found that over half remained in the sector (Fahlén and Sanchez- Domiguez 2018).

standing in their way of achieving their aspirations. For instance, those migrant women who felt the pull of obligation to provide the mainstay of financial support for families back home, had a weak sense of entitlement to develop their own projects. Others lacked the social networks and resources to realize their aspirations.

The extent to which institutional context can enable the capability to aspire and facilitate the conversion of resources into agency freedoms was underscored in our comparison of migrants working in the domestic service sector in Sweden with those in Spain, the other case in our study. The situation in Spain, with its low union density and general acceptance of informal work and precarity, offers a stark contrast. Despite laws designed to regulate the sector, the lack of governance persists, reflecting both the structural features of the market where the employer is a household (Spain) rather than the firm (Sweden), and the failure of political will (Hobson and Hellgren 2020). Moreover, unlike Sweden, Spain offers no stipends to migrants seeking training or higher education. Given the residual effects of the global financial crisis on high unemployment in the Spanish economy, few migrant care/domestic workers aspired to anything beyond finding more employment. None were entitled to unemployment insurance, which household employers are exempted from providing. Only 4 of our 60 interviewees in Spain had plans to study and these were women who already had tertiary degrees and whose husbands were earning good wages. With two-thirds of these workers either under- or unemployed and wages slashed, their aspirations for better futures were undone and remittances to families discontinued (Hellgren and Serrano 2018).

Migrant domestic workers, although employed in a precarious low-wage sector, are not a homogeneous group, varying by age, marital status migrant status and level of education,

whether they migrate alone or together with their families. Overwhelmingly, they are women who migrate from poorer to richer countries, from the Global South to North, from Eastern to Western Europe, all seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Whether their capability to aspire is activated and converted into agency freedoms depends upon layers of situated agency embedded in institutional societal and cultural contexts, which include racial and ethnic hierarchies within the receiving country. Whether these migrant workers have a sense of entitlement to claim opportunities and realize aspirations also hinges on the political climate toward migrants mirrored in the media where migrants can be vilified or celebrated. Their sense of entitlement often involves other collective actors, for instance, unions and NGOs and social movements supporting domestic worker rights. All of these form the multi-dimensionality in the conversion processes that enable opportunity and agency freedoms.

Awakening Aspirations

When we meet Shao Fen, she is a 32-year-old single mother with a 10-year-old girl. She has been working for the past five years as a shift worker at Elec's assembly line where electric wirings and harnesses for airplanes are manufactured. Born in France of parents with an immigrant background, her educational and professional pathway has not been without obstacles. Having left school at 16 years old without any certificate, she held a variety of instable and poorly paid jobs as waitress, cashier, etc., before an unplanned pregnancy when she was 22. This biographical turning-point caused her to be unemployed; unable to earn her living, she returned to her parents' house with her baby. For a year and a half she stayed at home raising her newborn, unable to forge any meaningful future and not even able to search for subsistence work. Thanks to the support of her father, who was working at Elec, she was recruited there first as a temporary worker, having her contract renewed over two years, then with a long-term full-time contract that allowed her to leave her parents' house and settle in

her own apartment with her daughter. Less than a year after having gotten a stable job, she entered a continuing-education project of four years whose target was a bachelor degree in applied foreign languages. She made an arrangement with her manager to be permanently on the morning shift so as to have time for continuing education in the afternoon when her daughter was at school. She also made an arrangement with her daughter's father to have him pick the daughter every morning and bring her to school. And when Shao Fen had late evening courses, her parents cared for the young girl.

Shao Fen's motive for this heavy investment of time and energy is her aspiration to leave Elec's assembly line and join the international-communication department of Flybest, the multinational group of which Elec is a part. Flybest is known for its professional-development policy which helps assembly-line workers to climb the career ladder. Although preparing and obtaining the required qualification certificate is by no means sufficient for reaching a desired position – simply allowing one to compete for it in case a position becomes vacant –, Flybest's support for continuing education and internal promotion awakens the hope and aspirations of a worker for further professional development (Zimmermann 2020).

In Shao Fen's narrative the family and workplace would appear to be the two most important elements in support of her aspirations. One cannot do without the other. Whereas Shao Fen's parents provide her with both material and affective support, helping her to alleviate the difficulties of being a single mother, the workplace helps to awaken her aspiration for professional development through opportunities and support for continuing training, along with the manager's trustful and supportive attitude.

Interestingly, Shao Fen does not mention any institutional support. Yet French law compels companies to help finance continuing training by allocating to it a percentage of their total wage bill (one percent at the time of this inquiry). But this money is dedicated to job-

adaptation training rather than professional-development. Nor does Shao Fen make use of the individual-training right instituted in 2004 and transformed in 2014 into a personal-training account allowing workers to follow a training of their choice independent of the company. The amount of the allowance (500 euros a year) is grossly inadequate for financing a professional-development scheme. The company's support for Shao Fen's project was much more than required by the institutional provisions.

Yet despite legal regulations, only few French companies finance continuing education programs for low-qualified, blue-collar workers like Shao Fen. Elec atypically financed Shao Fen's training costs (her own investment was one of time, as her training took place outside of working hours) which places Elec among the less than 10 percent of French capability-friendly companies as regards professional development (Zimmermann 2011; Lambert et al. 2012). Financial commitment alone does not make the difference. Shao Fen's narrative strongly underscores the role that managers play in the process of converting the training resources on offer by the organization into actual achievements as well as showing how they help to foster an employee's voice. She feels recognized and strongly supported by her boss who helps nurture her self-confidence and sense of entitlement. He provides her with advice as well as information about Flybest training policy and what exactly she is entitled to, and he has responded in positive fashion to her requests for the adjustment of her working hours. "He gave me a chance," she says, while the trade-unions, which do exist at Elec played no direct role in the process. Although they care about inclusiveness and equal access to training resources, trade unions are not able to provide enough to help to support individual capabilities to flourish in the workplace (Lambert et al. 2012; Zimmermann 2020). All things being equal, the capacity for aspiring to professional development is strongly related to how employees perceive the chances of their projects being realized, and this perception is partly shaped by the actual practices of the company they work in.

Shao Fen's case shows that imagining alternatives in future scenario-building requires a minimum of opportunity-freedom and agency-freedom, which in their turn nurture a sense of having some power to act in order to make such alternatives feasible. In the absence of any such sense, however, situated agency becomes negated and the capability to aspire is frozen in place. In Shao Fen's case the decisive issue in nurturing her capability to aspire is how exactly the organizational context interacts with other layers of her personal life.

Aspirations are not only a matter of individual dispositions and preferences. They flourish in the interaction between a person and her environment. Beyond the institutional and societal context, for working people the workplace also constitutes an important component. Individuals tend to adapt their preferences for professional development according to the opportunities (freedoms) which the organization makes available, so that aspirations can be annihilated or stimulated depending on the organizational culture (Lambert et al. 2012). Organizations contribute not only to influence the scope of opportunities workers have through the resources and constraints they provide, they can also support workers' agency and sense of entitlement through the empowering role that managers play. As gatekeepers of a company's training opportunities, managers are key actors in the empowerment of low-qualified employees with respect to professional development. Therefore, fostering workers' capabilities is not just a matter of human-resource policy but of organizational culture in bridging human-resource policy with work organization and managerial practices. As an active element in shaping employees' situated agency and projectivity, the organizational culture is particularly important for low-qualified workers who are often poorly endowed with individual resources other than familial ones.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to extend the borders of the sociology of futures through cross-fertilization of different conceptual domains: linking cognitive experiential aspects of projecting futures to the capability to aspire and opportunity and agency (freedoms) for the potential to achieve goals.

We argue that opening the black box of projectivity, agency and futures requires a dynamic and multi-dimensional framework making visible the processes underlying how the capacity to aspire is awakened, the capability to aspire activated and power to act enabled. These processes reflect cross-fertilization of our conceptual domains: intersections in cognitive and experiential processes of future making, where the past, present and future meet at the horizon of ends in view, a point where Dewey and Sen meet. We underscore the capability to aspire as a core component in this process, particularly for the vulnerable and disadvantaged, as illustrated by our two cases, the migrant domestic worker and the unskilled blue collar worker. Their future making takes shape when real opportunity freedoms become available for them, along with the resources to convert these possibilities in agency (freedoms) and choice. These resources can emerge in national, local, trans-national and global settings, in the form of policies that can be utilized, rights exercised and discourses that empower those with weak capabilities to claim them. They can also be resources that are non-institutional, such as support provided by social networks. Conversion of these resources into agency freedoms operates within multiple environments: the family, school, firm, neighbourhood, as illustrated by Yolanta's and Shao Fen's cases.

Our model visualizes the pathways from projectivity to the potential to achieve, together with the complex interactions in navigating the future. Our narratives reveal how imagining future alternatives is enacted in the lived experience of situated actors in time and space (Dewey, 1992; and Appadurai, 2004). Through their voices, we are able to capture the intersubjective cognitive dimensions in projections of futures and the capability to aspire. What they

perceive as their scope of alternatives can be recast with new possibilities and propelled by opportunity freedoms, which anticipate the potential to achieve. Their sense of entitlement to pursue their goals is embedded in institutional, societal and organizational environments and animated by cultural repertoires, such as lifelong learning for the unskilled and successful stories of immigrant achievements through education. Through these multi-layered mechanisms connected to the capability to aspire and power to act, we reveal the value of our cross-fertilization in conceptual territories.

Our dynamic agency framework offers conceptual space for the capacity to aspire to be awakened throughout the life course and among those with the least resources and voice. As the experiences of Yolanta and Shao Fen highlight, the capacity to aspire is activated through the capability to aspire. The conversion processes for the potential to achieve was driven by specific policies enacted at the national or firm level, but, also importantly, enabled by a range of actors: family members, a manager's support in a global firm that promoted professional training for unskilled workers (Shao Fen). For Yolanta, family support and social networks, as well as collective actors, such as unions and NGOs made possible the agency (freedoms) of migrants in Sweden for alternative futures choices that were not realizable for their counterparts in Spain. Nonetheless, our data do not reveal whether their potential to achieve and power to act resulted in the achievement of their goals. Nor do we know if their example enhanced the possibilities for others to follow in their footsteps. This is a project for future research.

Our two cases illustrate how the multi-dimensional and dynamic agency-centered model we propose provides a rich interpretative framework for empirical research in the sociology of futures. We have constructed a model for imagining alternative futures through the prism of a sociology of experience refracted through institutional, cultural and societal contextual differences that allows for comparisons across countries and between individuals and groups

with diverse aspirations and ends in view and the possibilities to pursue them. It provides scope for exploring comparisons of narratives of futures over time and in different life phases, as well as through generations, the latter revealed in the narratives of low expectations and aspirations that are transmitted from first to second generation immigrants (Aradhya et al 2020; Vignole et al. 2020). The interactive dimensions in the model — resources, conversion processes, perceived scope of alternatives, and sense of entitlement— offer pathways for generating mechanisms for explaining how multiple forms of disadvantage operate at different levels of analysis with a multi-level lens: through the family, firm, neighbourhood, nation state and beyond.

We lay emphasis on vulnerable groups because they lack individual means and resources to actuate alternative futures. Their situation foregrounds the normative aspect of Sen's approach that assumes collective responsibility for creating opportunity freedoms for those with weak capability. This perspective is critical during periods of upheaval and uncertainty, such as the global recession, climate crises, and the widespread pandemic when the paperless migrants, precarious workers, and the long-term poor, suffer disproportionality (Hellgren and Seranno 2019; Hivinden and Shoyen 2017).

Tavory and Eliasson (2013) highlight the ways in which contingencies lead toward recalibration of futures and how macro-forces can “invite” people to imagine different futures at a specific historical moment. Dewey's insights on the fragility of futures, underscores the sense of danger and risk facing the living creature (Dewey, 1950). Both reflect the dystopian and utopian elements in the sociology of futures that have emerged from threats to our institutions and the sustainability of the planet. Both impel us to ask how individual and collective situated agents navigate the future in unsettled times. Looking from lens of threats on a global scale (Vignole et al. 2020), we ask: what are the long-term consequences of living with extreme uncertainty and risk on the capability to aspire.

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